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1 Running Head: ORGANISATIONAL STRESSORS IN DISABILITY FOOTBALL

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3 **An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international**
4 **disability footballers**

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6 Jon Whittingham¹, Jamie B. Barker², Matthew J. Slater³, and Rachel Arnold⁴

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11 Author Note: ¹ JW Sport Consultancy Ltd, UK; ² School of Sport, Exercise and
12 Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, UK; ³
13 School of Life Sciences and Education, Staffordshire University, Leek Road, Stoke-
14 on-Trent, ST4 2DF, UK. ⁴ Department for Health, Centre for Motivation and Health
15 Behaviour Change, Bath University, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK.

16

17 Correspondence address: Jamie Barker, School of Sport, Exercise and Health
18 Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, UK, Tel +44 01509
19 226 302. Electronic mail may be sent to j.b.barker@lboro.ac.uk).

20 **An exploration of the organisational stressors encountered by international**
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Abstract

Presently, disability athletes remain under-represented in organisational stressor research. Our study sought to bring novel insights to this area by determining the organisational stressors experienced by international disability footballers. Twelve current international disability footballers (10 male, 2 female) from a range of UK impairment squads took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant, and data were analysed by content analysis procedures. Organisational stressors data were abstracted into Arnold, Wagstaff, Steadman, and Pratt's (2017) concepts, and Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) four general dimensions: leadership and personnel issues, cultural and team issues, logistical and environmental issues, and performance and personal issues, revealing a series of football specific nuances. Our study is the first exploration of the prevalence of organisational stressors within international disability football. Our study also provides practitioners with an understanding of the common and unique organisational stressors faced by international disability footballers. Finally, we suggest a series of practical recommendations for policy development within disability football organisations to aid athletes to effectively manage organisational stressors.

Keywords: elite, para-athletes, Paralympic, performance, soccer, stress

81 insight into the performance environment the athletes operate in and their perceptions
82 of organisational stressors encountered (Fletcher et al., 2006). We anticipated that
83 taking this particular lens will provide a springboard for future researchers to explore
84 other key aspects of the meta-model of stress within disability football (e.g.,
85 appraisal and coping mechanisms).

86 Non-disabled athlete populations have been, and continue to be, investigated
87 extensively within organizational stress work in sport. Specifically, more recent
88 findings have demonstrated the links between appraisal of, and influence of,
89 organisational stressors upon performance (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017b), the
90 range of emotional consequences if stressors persist (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, &
91 Daniels, 2018) and how dealing with stressors may impact upon future playing time
92 (e.g., Rumbold, Fletcher, & Daniels, 2020). Despite this emerging literature, studies
93 with disabled athletes remain comparatively limited. With an ever-increasing
94 number of disabled athletes at major sport competitions such as the Paralympic
95 Games, researchers have outlined the importance of understanding this population
96 group, and the potentially unique organisational stressors that they encounter, to aid
97 with supporting athletes, coaches and practitioners in achieving a more optimal stress
98 experience (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017; Rumbold et al., 2018).

99 To date, the most comprehensive study exploring the prevalence of
100 organisational stressors within disability sport was conducted by Arnold, Wagstaff,
101 et al. (2017). In contrast to previous literature (e.g., Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012),
102 this study reported a number of salient similarities (e.g., selection processes) and
103 differences (e.g., classification, lack of crowds, coaches being unaware of tailoring
104 exercises, lack of knowledge) between the experiences of British disabled athletes
105 compared to non-disabled athletes. In addition, findings from studies conducted

106 with Canadian (i.e., Allan, Smith, Côte, Ginis, & Latimer-Cheung, 2018) and
107 Kenyan para-athletes (Crawford & Stodolska, 2008) have identified comparable
108 considerations including a lack of financial resources, coaching, and negative
109 attitudes towards disability. Overall, this research provides an important foundation
110 to develop from and adds to previous evidence that has explored other forms of
111 stressors experienced by disabled athletes, such as social and policial issues (e.g.,
112 Bush, Silk, Porter, & Howe, 2013).

113 While Arnold and colleagues' (2017) findings develop the breadth of our
114 understanding by focusing on eight sports and a range of disabilities, there is a need
115 to gain a more detailed understanding within a specific sport to begin the
116 development of evidence-based interventions tailored to the nuances of specific
117 sports. By studying a range of disabilities within a single sport we are better able to
118 understand the contextual naunces (including intra-group differences and
119 similarities) and the unique culture at play. Although some studies have examined
120 disabled athletes within the same sport (e.g., Campbell & Jones, 2002), such studies
121 have not specifically focused upon exploring the organisational stressors that the
122 athlete encounters.

123 One sport absent from previous research is that of disability football.
124 Football is one of the most popular global sports and although previous
125 investigations have explored organisational stressors within football across a range
126 of contexts at the highest levels of the game (e.g., Kristiansen, Ivarsson, Solstad, &
127 Roberts, 2019), none have specifically focussed upon disability football at any level
128 of participation.

129 Disability sport is governed according to the International Sport Federation
130 (ISF) criteria relevant to each impairment group. One example of a unique stressor

131 disabled athletes are subject to is the ongoing and evolving eligibility checks
132 according to the impairment specific ISF, a criterion not encountered within non-
133 disability football. Disability football is the seventh highest participated team sport
134 in England (Sport England, 2015), placing it above more established non-disability
135 sports (e.g., rugby league) although below male and female football. Despite
136 significant investment into disability football over the previous 20 years via a
137 number of stakeholders, the amount of funding available remains comparatively very
138 low to the non-disabled game which is able to attract significant sponsorship
139 investment. Consequently, although both male and female football involvement has
140 seen significant developments in their playing structures in recent years (for instance,
141 through the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan in the boy's academy
142 system in 2012 and the professionalisation of women's pyramid system resulting in
143 full-time contracts for those in the Women's Super League in 2011), disabled
144 footballers have to juggle the demands of working full-time outside of football as
145 they seek to progress to the pinnacle of their sport. The experiences that disability
146 footballers encounter therefore are likely to be unique within the wider sport context
147 and potentially create novel demands for performers particularly as the public
148 awareness of disability football, and sport, increases.

149 Evidently, organisational stressors are experienced by elite disabled athletes
150 (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), but presently there is limited understanding of the
151 organisational stressors prevalent within the novel context of UK international
152 disability football. Using Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) framework as an
153 underpinning, the purpose of our current study was to understand the organisational
154 stressors experienced by international disability footballers. While not a central aim
155 of our study, we also sought to provide data which may enable national governing

bodies (NGBs) and key stakeholders (e.g., coaches and sport science practitioners) working within disability football (and in other sports) to create effective organisational structures including an optimal stress environment.

Method

Approach

Underpinning our investigation are philosophical assumptions of ontological relativism (i.e., reality is mind dependent and multiple) and epistemological post-positivism (i.e., knowledge is multiple rather than singular; see Creswell, 2013).

Given our focus upon organisational stressors and the population under study, it is pertinent to consider any analysis from the perspective of the participant given that previous researchers have indicated the importance of understanding experience from the perspective of the disabled athlete as each athlete will ‘experience’ their disability uniquely (e.g., Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). A qualitative methodology was deemed best suited for this investigation in view of the limited literature examining organisational stressors in disability sport (Silverman, 2006).

Specifically, interviews were chosen to encourage participants to provide in-depth information based on their first-hand experiences and thereby allow participants to express their individual identities as a part of their personal story which is developed according to the cultural parameters they operate within (Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Participants

Participants were selected via purposive sampling techniques to ensure representation from across the NGB international disability squads and impairment spectrum. Participants were required to have a classified disability (confirmed by their NGB and ISF) and be a current member of an international disability football

squad. As part of their preparations for a yearly major competition, the participants were training two days each month within the environment of their international squad. While they were also expected to follow both a strength and conditioning programme provided centrally from the NGB as well as partaking in regular football activities within club football. All participants were interviewed prior to their next major competition with the sample comprising 12 footballers (10 male, 2 female), ranging in age from 19 to 33 ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.50 \pm 3.58$), who had been international athletes for an average of 5.92 (± 3.20) years. Two starting footballers were included from each of the following squads: blind, cerebral palsy, deaf male, deaf female, partially sighted, and wheelchair football teams. All participants within the sample were part-time athletes and not paid for their involvement within their squad or to compete within their global competition cycle.

Procedure

Following institutional ethics approval, players eligible for the study were contacted to take part in the research and were informed about the study, what their involvement would entail and their participatory rights (covering aspects such as confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw) before arranging a convenient time and location for the interview. An interview guide was developed to explore the topics pertinent for disability footballers with a copy of the guide provided to the players one week prior to the interview to allow them to consider their responses more fully for the interview. Pilot interviews were conducted prior to the main study with two recently retired (less than two years) players to check the appropriateness of the interview guide, and allow the interviewer to refine questioning techniques. Based upon the pilot interviews, several further probes (e.g., “What effect do you think that had?”) were devised to support with clarifying and

206 elaborating on the player's perspectives (cf. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne,
207 Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). Each player provided informed consent prior to
208 the start of data collection. Interviews ($M_{\text{minutes}} = 88.56 \pm 16.68$) were conducted
209 face-to-face or via FaceTime to account for the preference of the interviewee (i.e.,
210 offering access to an interpreter for deaf participants), were digitally recorded, and
211 transcribed verbatim.

212 **Interview Guide**

213 A five section interview guide was developed. The first section outlined to
214 the participants the study focus and their participatory rights. The second section
215 encompassed a series of questions to develop rapport with the player, for instance,
216 "Tell me what you consider to be one of your major achievements so far in football"
217 and "Tell me how your first call up to the [country] squad came about". The third
218 section defined organisational stressors to check the players' understanding
219 regarding the focus of the study. The fourth section included questions exploring the
220 players' experiences of organisational stressors in their squad, for instance, "Tell me
221 about your training schedule during your last tournament", "Talk to me about the
222 different personnel working with the squad", "What can you tell me about the
223 support players receive" and "Tell me about the team's goals and how they were
224 determined". The final section allowed players to discuss additional issues they
225 wished to raise which had not been already covered.

226 **Data Analysis**

227 In analysing the data, we used Fletcher et al.'s (2006) definition of
228 organisational stressors to provide the basis for that which should be coded as a
229 'stressor'. The interview transcripts were manually analysed using inductive and
230 deductive content analysis procedures (Weber, 1985). Specifically, environmental

231 demands associated primarily and directly with the NGB within which the disability
232 footballer was operating were firstly identified (e.g., organisational stressors). The
233 analysis process involved the interviewer reading, re-reading, and listening to the
234 transcripts and coding the raw-data threads deductively into the concept groupings,
235 themes, and general dimensions as presented within Arnold and Fletcher (2012) and
236 Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017). These were: (1) leadership and personal issues; (2)
237 cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and environmental issues; and (4)
238 performance and personal issues. Constant comparative methods were used
239 throughout the analysis process to compare stressors and anecdotes for any
240 similarities, variations, or differences, as well as comparing across the analysis levels
241 (e.g., stressors to concepts, concepts to concepts; Holt & Tamminen, 2010). At each
242 stage of the deductive analysis, discussions with critical friends were completed
243 before continuing the analysis to the next stage. Where new concepts emerged, these
244 were inductively labelled before being deductively placed into the appropriate theme
245 and general dimension grouping in accordance with Arnold and colleagues' (2012;
246 2017) findings.

247 **Reflexivity and Methodological Rigour**

248 In view of the nature of the study, our approach centred upon a relativist
249 position (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) in that views are
250 relative to differences in perception from the participants' own experiences of
251 disability. Further, consideration also has to be given to the potential for the
252 experiences and background of the primary researcher that had the potential to
253 influence the data collection, analysis, and subsequent presentation of findings.
254 Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, an
255 audit trail was maintained and shared with the second and third authors throughout

256 the analysis process to consider the thematic ideas interpreted. Second, a critical
257 friend was engaged with in order to challenge the decisions being made and
258 encourage reflection of alternative interpretations (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018).
259 Third, within the Results and Discussion, content codes are accompanied by
260 contextually rich, direct quotations to enable readers to make their own meaningful
261 interpretations of the data (cf. Biddle et al., 2001; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

262 **Results and Discussion**

263 In total, 428 organisational stressors were interpreted from the data that were
264 then abstracted into the concepts detailed by Arnold, Wagstaff et al. (2017) and
265 reviewed in-line with Arnold and Fletcher's (2012) four general dimensions: (1)
266 leadership and personnel issues; (2) cultural and team issues; (3) logistical and
267 environmental issues; and (4) performance and personal issues. Leadership and
268 personnel issues encapsulate organisational stressors associated with management
269 and support of a sports team (see Figure 1). Cultural and team issues encapsulate the
270 organisational stressors associated with attitudes and behaviours within the sports
271 team. Logistical and environmental issues encapsulate organisational stressors
272 associated with the organisation of operations for training and/or competition.
273 Finally, performance and personal issues encapsulate the organisational stressors
274 associated with a performer's athletic career and physical self (Arnold & Fletcher,
275 2012). Within each general dimension, we have identified nuances specific to the
276 relativist experiences of international disability footballers, and football as a sport,
277 that extends the insights provided in previous research (i.e., Arnold et al., 2017). Full
278 analysis of the data is available on request from the first author.

279 **Leadership and Personnel Issues**

280 Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to coaching
281 delivery and interactions, disability awareness of key staff, team expectations and
282 pressures, playing experience within the squad, the governing body, media profile,
283 and game officials. We found that athletes had concerns regarding the availability of
284 specialist team staff which specifically related to how the functional efficiency of the
285 team was impacted when key medical personnel were unavailable. Further to this,
286 we also found the players' perceptions of favouritism within the NGB towards non-
287 disability over elite disability squads was a key stressor identified. Previous research
288 on performance environments has noted how athlete performance can be negatively
289 impacted through both team management factors in non-disability (e.g., Arnold,
290 Collington, Manley, Rees, Soanes, & Williams, 2019) as well as disability settings
291 (e.g., Crawford & Stodolska, 2008), and the salience of coach leadership skills on
292 and off the pitch (e.g., Allan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the favouritism towards
293 non-disability football teams relative to the disability teams within the same NGB is
294 a novel finding in this context. An additional finding related to the players'
295 perceptions of the coach's interactions with them and, in particular, challenges
296 resulting from coaches communicating with players in their preferred language. This
297 was a consideration highlighted specifically in regards the deaf squads as one player
298 noted:

299 Without the interpreter, we wouldn't be able to even get any information
300 across but it's just that I think a lot of times, like even the coaches and the
301 manager, I'm not sure they're aware that sometimes it is second-rate
302 information that's been passed on...So it's a little bit whether the coach is
303 really getting his point across so sometimes that, like sort of, gets a bit
304 muddled. (Participant 10)

305 Indeed, previous researchers have not recruited deaf athletes (e.g., Arnold et
306 al., 2017) and thus our finding regarding the importance of the interpreter and the
307 apparent strain on coach-athlete relations as a result of such communications
308 advances our understanding of disability footballers' experiences of organisational
309 stressors.

310 The international disability footballers in our current study also identified the
311 potential impact and influence of parents upon the squad players and staff as a
312 distraction to team operations. This was particularly apparent in relation to decisions
313 made on squad selection for competitions and the tactics and/or strategies utilised
314 where parents had direct access to the group throughout the duration of competition.
315 For instance, one player expressed:

316 So like the younger lads, their parents will come to games which is really
317 interesting because they've probably been there now three or four years to all
318 tournaments. So we've actually got genuine support when we go away and the
319 other side of it is, you know, they have opinions as everyone does in
320 football...but they have opinions that sometimes it's not that they're not right,
321 but when everyone starts to have an opinion and you just think "That's not
322 ideal saying that. That's gonna put something in someone's head". But they've
323 gone out their way to come support their kid. So, you know, we have to manage
324 parents...We're an elite squad yet the manager's managing parents so that's
325 another bit where we, certainly senior players, try and manage it...Sometimes
326 it could all be positive, and it's probably too positive, and you think "Humm,
327 he didn't do that well. I wouldn't go over the top"...so it's managing
328 them...that's a massive [impact on the staff and players], but if it [parental
329 input] got out of hand, it'd be an absolute nightmare. (Participant 4)

330 Considering this stressor, researchers have identified comparable
331 observations relating to ‘detrimental parental behaviours’ such as over-inflating
332 player egos (e.g., Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012). Researchers within non-
333 disability football academies have highlighted that parents experience organisational
334 stressors too (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010). Studies have also shown that
335 parents naturally feel empathy for their children in competitive settings (Harwood,
336 Clarke, & Cushion, 2016) and go through several experiences associated with
337 watching their child compete (e.g., Harwood et al., 2010). Additionally, several
338 studies have indicated the increased presence and involvement of parents in sporting
339 activities where their child has a disability (e.g., Shapiro & Malone, 2016) and the
340 impact this has upon their participation. In our study, participants are on average 25
341 years old (adults) and are still talking about their parents in relation to their football
342 performance. This data could imply that disability footballers are perhaps still, or at
343 least more, reliant on their parents for a range of football-related issues. Indeed, the
344 parental involvement and associated organisational stressors for footballers (non-
345 disabled) would stop at approximately 18 years, but our novel findings indicate that
346 for disability footballers, organisational stressors surrounding parents still prevail
347 into adulthood, and therefore have important implications for coaches and sport
348 psychologists working in international disability football.

349 In support of these findings, Ferrari (2019) has indicated that parents of
350 children with disabilities tend to be more critical than other parents. Potential
351 reasons for this parental dynamic may be that parents have differing experiences and
352 knowledge of the sport (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008) and that
353 parents may find it difficult to manage their child’s emotional-motivational levels in
354 dealing with failure (Ferrari, 2019). In our study, it is possible that players perceived

355 that their parents are still developing their understanding regarding international
356 disability football, and their parents' psychological approach may hold more in
357 common with that of amateur youth sport than international adult environments (e.g.,
358 Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). Through adopting dual empathetic and
359 educational approaches with parents, therefore, NGBs and elite disability squad staff
360 can support parents to maintain their parent-child relationships and identify how to
361 prevent such over-protectionist tendencies occurring (i.e., Antle, Mills, Steele,
362 Kalnins, & Rossen, 2007) through heightening their sense of being close to the
363 overall setup (i.e., Ferrari, 2019).

364 **Cultural and Team Issues**

365 Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to teammates'
366 personality and attitudes, cultural norms, and team atmosphere and support. One
367 prominent observation related to the perceived sacrifices that players felt they made
368 in relation to diet and fitness comparative to their teammates given that the squad
369 spend very little time together. For instance, one player suggested:

370 I mean it is hard to be motivated for some people if you're not being around the
371 environment all the time. I can see, I can see why it would, like, some of the lads
372 would find it hard to be motivated. I mean like, as I said, some of the lads are still
373 quite young and young in the mind as well so like they, they so still like going out
374 for a drink here and there and they do still like, like, they don't have the best
375 diets...Like for me, personally I'm the sort of person that just loves the training,
376 loves to eat well anyway so it's not really difficult for me that when a tournament
377 comes around...Like I said, I remember coming away from [country] thinking like
378 "We didn't do well there" because the lads, like, some of the lads have putting
379 things on Snapchat like a week before we go and it, like annoying me, and I always

380 felt like we come away and, even though you feel like yourself you could have
381 done a little bit better, or could have worked a little bit harder leading up to it cause
382 when you don't achieve your goals, you always, like that's the first thing you look
383 at, thinking "What could I have done more of or better?" but then I was always
384 sort of coming away and thinking like "The lads haven't trained as hard as", like I
385 trained morning, noon and night for some day and you just feel like if they'd done
386 the same, like, was it being in the same situation...we might not get the contact
387 time together as much as we'd like but what you do away is as important, if not
388 more. I think that kind of penny finally dropped with a few lads that they needed
389 to go and sort themselves out a little bit...I think that's always one of the main
390 barriers because you're not meeting up as much as you can, you need to do as
391 much as possible away, and I know it's hard. Like everyone, we're not
392 professional people, we've got jobs and whatever...it is hard to stay in, I know that
393 cause I've been there. I remember going out with my mates and having to then
394 get up at 7, 8 o'clock in the morning to go strength and conditioning. And it is
395 hard, but like for me, you're an England player and you just go and do it. Don't
396 moan about it, you go and do it and once you're back and its out the way, it's out
397 the way isn't it? But I mean not everyone can have that mentality. (Participant 2)

398 The players' perceptions on this stressor tallies with research that has noted
399 how antisocial teammate behaviours (e.g., being unwilling to partake in prescribed
400 physical conditioning training) can negatively impact upon an athlete's sport
401 experience in contrast to prosocial behaviours (e.g., partaking in team bonding
402 exercises) which are positively associated with effort, performance, and enjoyment
403 (Bruner et al., 2017). As noted by Allan et al. (2018), an athlete's sense of belonging
404 is wrapped up within their performance and relational narratives, with possible

405 interpretations based around social acceptance as well as a sense of community
406 within the group potentially influencing performance output.

407 Off-field relationships can play a significant role in social support and team
408 effectiveness (e.g., Gershgoren et al., 2015) with player relationships shown to be
409 related to self-confidence (e.g., Freeman & Rees, 2009) and performance in football
410 (e.g., Gioldasis, Stavrou, Mitrotasios, & Psychountaki, 2016). Extending Arnold,
411 Wagstaff et al.'s (2017) observations relating to team atmosphere and support
412 further, for one elite disability football impairment group, social cohesion (i.e.,
413 Carron, Bray, & Eys, 2002) within the playing group was particularly prominent
414 (e.g., Roberts, Arnold, Gillison, Bilzon, & Colclough, 2020). This is illustrated by
415 one participant who stated: "...when I first started it was very much the signers and
416 the oralists. Which wasn't great (be)cause you don't want that in a team"
417 (Participant 3), and another who noted, "...as bad as it might sound, I can hear, and
418 like previously it was more of a deaf-based squad...so I sort of got on a bit better
419 with the staff" (Participant 11).

420 Research within deaf sport and with deaf athletes signifies a key
421 consideration relating to Deaf culture, and by association, the upbringing an
422 individual player has had (e.g., Ammons & Eickman, 2011). In some cases, there
423 may be no association with Deaf culture at all; for instance, recent statistics from the
424 National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) show that 90% of deaf children are born
425 to hearing parents, with the majority of deaf children educated within mainstream
426 education and not accessing British Sign Language during their childhood (NDCS,
427 2017). These findings are significant to understand communication preferences
428 between those who sign and those who communicate orally (i.e., Atherton, 2009),
429 and the challenges of developing social cohesion within sport teams. The literature

430 is limited in this regard; however, one study that examines the role of football within
431 the deaf community highlights the isolation that deaf players can feel off the pitch
432 and how unfulfilling their experiences of playing can be (Atherton, Russell, &
433 Turner, 2001). The insights from the deaf footballers in the current study highlight a
434 stressor associated with encouraging deaf and hearing-impaired players volition to
435 work together (social and task-related).

436 **Logistical and Environmental Issues**

437 Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to facilities and
438 equipment, rules and regulations, travel, weather conditions, structure of training,
439 competition format and selection. Selection was a prominent concept across all
440 squads and specifically, two strands emerged relating to the identification of new
441 players as well as selection into squads. Participants highlighted the lack of
442 prospective players being identified to suitably challenge players within the current
443 squad, as highlighted by one player who said: “It’s not competitive at all to be
444 honest. You kind of, without sounding big headed, you kind of know you’re pretty
445 much in the squad” (Participant 3). The apparent lack of a deeper player pool led to
446 further stressors regarding the perceived disparity in team selection policy as
447 illustrated here:

448 I’ve seen like other players turn up late to, half a day late, leave half a day early
449 since then they maybe are a bit more of a valuable player on the pitch and
450 nothing happens with that...There are untouchable players in the squad.

451 Definite, definite untouchable players in the squad. (Participant 6)

452 Similarly, stressors associated with classification were also raised with
453 participants in the current study viewing the process as stressful from several
454 perspectives. For instance, one stressor related to a new classification process which

455 was due to be implemented within cerebral palsy football, While another stressor
456 related to being reclassified ahead of a competition in partially sighted football:

457 I've been classified three times...you're just thinking "Oh my god, I just
458 want to get this out the way" because it's very hard to focus on the
459 tournament when you've got that in mind. (Participant 2)

460 A further stressor related to the perceived limited availability and use of the
461 current NGB training kit. A particular part of this stressor was how the kit was
462 comparatively available to and used by the non-disability squads despite all
463 international squads being grouped within the same NGB operational matrix to
464 receive centralised support:

465 ...when we've turned up and we've got the old, you know, last season's kits
466 and stuff like that...You wouldn't give any other [NGB] squad these...that's
467 more the stress side for me, because I think we're [country]...we're going to
468 represent the country, we're representing the [NGB] so why not put us out in
469 the newest of gear...instead of having us wearing last seasons and, it's more
470 of a morale thing as well for the lads. (Participant 9)

471 This stressor, which centred on access to kit and how it may feed into squad
472 morale, has not been identified in previous studies of disability athletes (Arnold,
473 Wagstaff, et al., 2017). One potential rationale for this being perceived as a stressor
474 may be contextualised from the perspective of the social identity approach (Tajfel &
475 Turner, 1979). To elaborate, previous researchers have shown that elite disability
476 athletes desire to be recognised first and foremost as an athlete (Purdue & Howe,
477 2012). However, international disability football players in the current study felt that
478 being unable to use the same training kit as the elite non-disability squads results in

479 the players perceiving themselves to be part of an out-group rather than an in-group
480 within the NGB setup.

481 Further, investigations of Team GB at the London 2012 Olympic Games
482 identified team kit to be a salient factor in the development of team identity,
483 particularly in highlighting in-group characteristics comparative to other groups
484 (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015). The authors note that the use of a single
485 team kit resulted in the development of a single organisational entity spanning across
486 teams under Team GB. One comparable element which can be drawn between Team
487 GB and the NGB elite squads in the current study are that both organisations operate
488 within high performance environments. Further, Allan et al. (2018) identified within
489 their review the notion of belongingness as one of several experiential elements of
490 participation, and noted the inconsistencies perceived by individual athletes in the
491 way each of these elements is experienced and can impact upon their sporting
492 involvement. However, in contrast with this study and Slater et al.'s (2015) findings,
493 the perceptions of the disability footballers in the current study indicate that they do
494 not recognise themselves as being a part of the same organisational entity as the elite
495 non-disability squads, and therefore the potential psychological benefits to enhance
496 performance may not be present (cf. Høigaard et al., 2013).

497 **Performance and Personal Issues**

498 Stressors identified within this theme (see Figure 1) related to finances,
499 injuries, and diet and hydration. Players highlighted several concerns relating to
500 financial considerations, such as apprehension at a loss of earnings While with their
501 squad as a result of having to take time off from their job. For example, one player
502 noted:

503 ... that was a big stress I had, just the financial side because it was just not
504 worth . . . it wasn't financially viable for me to turn up to training camps and
505 then miss work and not get paid for it. (Participant 9)

506 Equally, a prominent stressor for players centred around injury support away
507 from elite squad settings. Researchers have reported that injury rates are comparable
508 to those in non-disability sport and that injury is a significant stressor for disabled
509 athletes (Fagher et al., 2016). One reason for this relates to the potential for an
510 injury to pose additional limitations on a disabled athlete and their everyday
511 activities (Weiler, van Mechelen, Fuller, & Verhagen, 2016). Although international
512 disability sport is now viewed comparably to international non-disability setups (e.g.,
513 Fagher et al., 2016), the majority of the elite disability footballers do not have full-
514 time contracts and undertake their preparations away from formal training camps.
515 Consequently, players are potentially more likely to incur an injury in their home-
516 setting. Previous researchers have shown that being unable to access a trusted
517 medical professional may lead to increased stress and anxiety levels (e.g., Podlog,
518 Dimmock, & Miller, 2011) however identifying appropriate medical support can be
519 challenging for disabled athletes (Ahmed et al., 2015), as one player observed:

520 I've had a few injuries in the past where it's really hard to get support if you
521 can't prove you did [it] While at [nation]...anything we get injured by doing
522 is stuff we're doing away in preparation for [nation]. You know, you're an
523 [nation] player 12 months of the year. (Participant 4)

524 A further stressor related to the availability of lifestyle development support,
525 particularly given the majority of elite disability footballers are not full-time athletes.
526 The players' concerns related to the appropriateness of aspects such as following
527 ascribed fitness programmes to fit in alongside their full-time employment

528 obligations: “Sometimes [staff member’s] programme’s a bit unrealistic with [their]
529 morning and afternoon sessions. That’s probably based more around a pro-football
530 player or a player that doesn’t work” (Participant 6). It may be that support staff with
531 a background in football are not perceived to tailor their programme optimally for
532 disability footballers in terms of time management.

533 Our findings identify novel and key stressors which have not been previously
534 reported in the literature (e.g., communication barriers between hearing coaches and
535 deaf players; parental influence on and around the squad; players’ perceptions of
536 their teammates lifestyle in preparing for squad activities; and a perceived lack of
537 identity with and to the other NGB squads). This study, therefore, not only
538 contributes to knowledge in this area, but also can inform applied practice in
539 international disability football. While some stressors encountered were similar to
540 those previously reported with non-disabled athletes (e.g., injury support), other
541 stressors were similar to disability specific ones identified previously (e.g.,
542 classification); thus, providing further evidence to the prevalence of organisational
543 stressors within sporting environments.

544 **Applied Implications**

545 Although it can be challenging to identify and introduce stressor reduction
546 interventions within sport organizations (i.e., Moore, Freeman, Hase, Solomon-
547 Moore, & Arnold, 2019), our study provides a number of applied implications which
548 may aid this venture. First, the findings illuminate a need to educate parents in
549 regards to their involvement and support of disability footballers (Gould, Lauer,
550 Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). This is a novel finding, and is particularly pertinent
551 to parents who may feel unfamiliar with an international disability environment, and
552 this could be achieved through educational workshops through the NGB (e.g.,

553 Knight et al., 2017). Second, national team identity-specific stressors could be
554 reduced through embracing a shared team identity between elite disability and non-
555 disability teams, initiated by and through the NGB (i.e., Slater et al., 2015). This
556 could include access to National Training Centres for entire squad training and
557 competition camps and using the same national kit for preparations and
558 competitions. Third, to alleviate stressors relating to coach-player communication in
559 football, clear short- (e.g., professional development opportunities), and long-term
560 (e.g., mentoring schemes) solutions need to be presented. Fourth, the findings from
561 this study provide supporting evidence for key NGB staff to use in seeking to
562 influence internal policy. It may be prudent for football governing bodies to garner
563 additional support within their organisation for elite disability teams centred upon
564 organisational stressors that players are prone to, as found in our study, and which
565 may negatively impact upon performance (i.e., Rumbold et al., 2018).

566 **Limitations and Future Researcher Directions**

567 Regarding shortcomings of this study, first it is important to emphasise that
568 the findings may only be specific to the organisation sampled or to disability football
569 provision at the international level. However, it is possible that other athletes and
570 NGBs may have encountered similar issues to those discussed, and thus may benefit
571 from the findings and their implications. Second, the study focused on international
572 disability footballers, and female athletes were under-represented as a result of the
573 NGB elite squad structures. The data presented supports the notion that certain
574 stressors are unique to certain groups and contexts (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012).
575 Specifically within elite disability football, investigations may be directed towards
576 developing deeper understanding of the potential variance of stressors reported by
577 different impairment groups and genders (e.g., Atherton et al., 2001), and to the

578 effects of coping mechanisms utilised by players (i.e., Kristiansen et al., 2012).
579 Further, investigations of organisational stressors within elite disability football from
580 other countries may offer an opportunity to explore the stressors within different
581 cultures (i.e., Arnold, Ponnusamy, Zhang, & Gucciardi, 2017). Finally, we provide
582 our interpretation of the organisational stressors experienced by international
583 disability footballers. Other researchers, particularly with different philosophies
584 (e.g., an interpretivist position), may have interpreted these disability footballer
585 experiences differently.

586 **Conclusion**

587 Our study is the first to explore the organisational stressors experienced by
588 international disability footballers across all impairment squads within a single NGB.
589 The study enhances awareness and understanding of the first stage of Fletcher et al.'s
590 (2006) meta model, that is the stressors component within the P-E fit stage.
591 Specifically, it helps to understand from a theoretical standpoint, which stressors
592 might arise for international disability footballers, which is a fundamental first step
593 before the rest of the meta model can then be applied (e.g., appraisal, coping etc).
594 While the findings illustrate similarities with previous researchers sampling disability
595 athletes (i.e., Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017), they also advance understanding by
596 highlighting novel organisational stressors experienced by disabled international
597 footballers, including: (1) the overreliance on parental support into adulthood; (2) a
598 lack of continuity in kit across all football squads and potential for a shared social
599 identity to be developed across the NGB and; (3) ineffective communication
600 strategies.

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602

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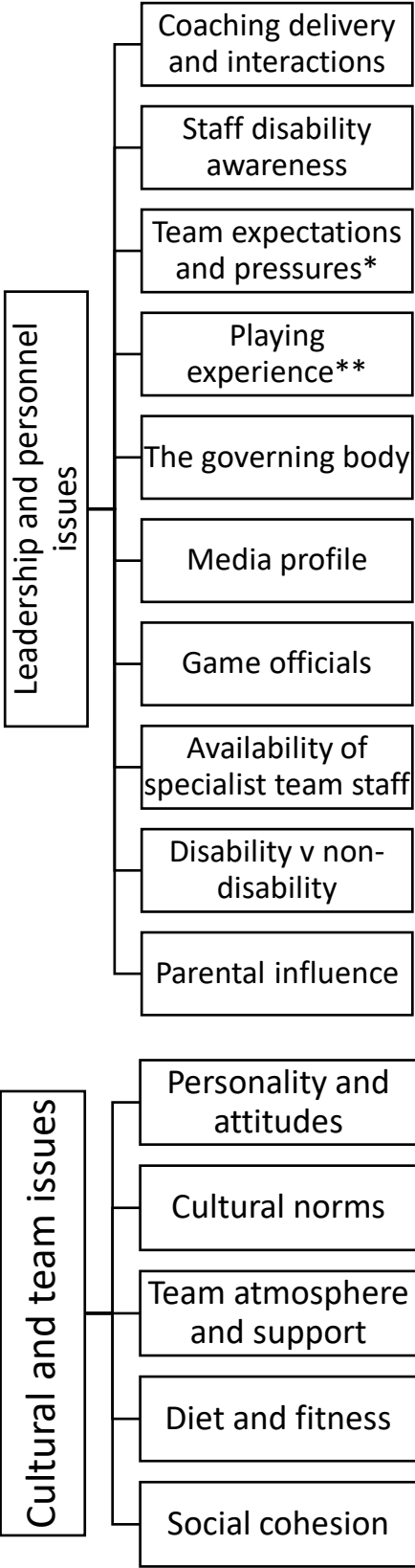
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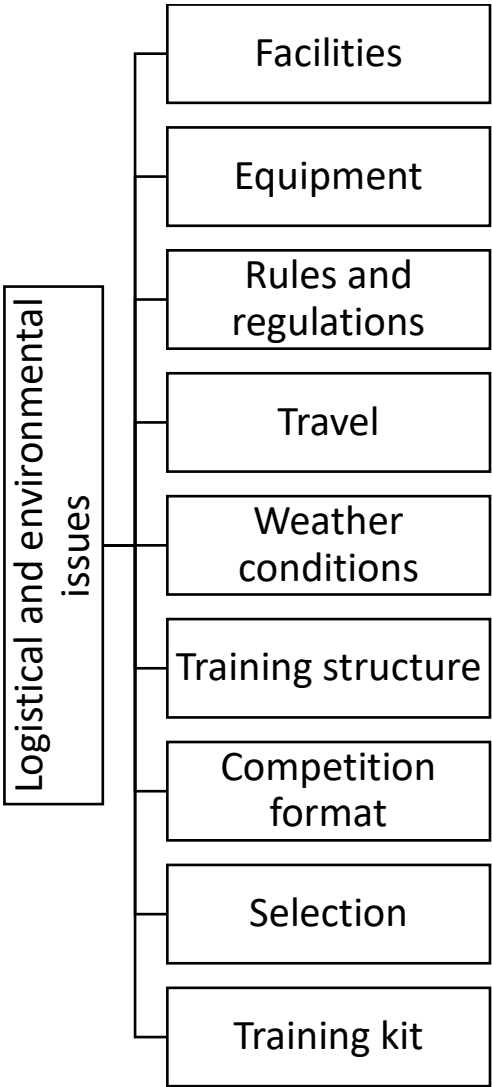
795 **Figure 1: Hierarchical sub-themes**



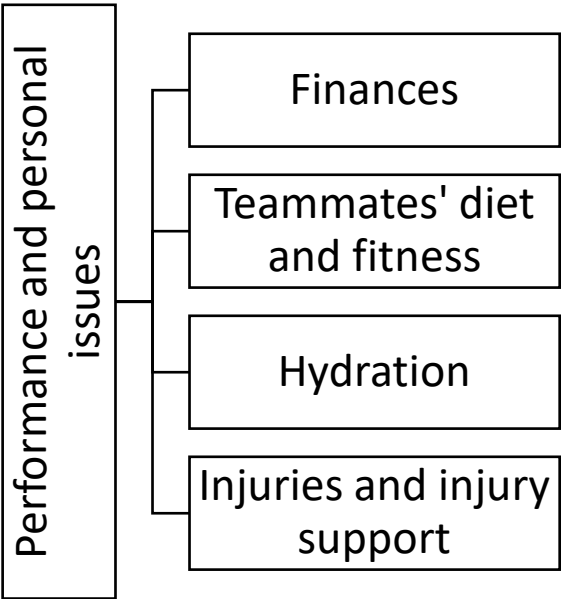
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- 800 |* Relates to managing expectations of the NGB to what ‘success looks like’ for the
801 team comparative to what other nations are able to draw upon pre- and during
802 competition.
- 803 ** Relates to the experience of playing for the relevant international squad under the
804 management of Head Coach pre- and during competition